Toes and Paint

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No one will remember me, she thought.

She hangs upside down,
rain water collects in her open mouth,
behind her teeth.

She researches family members who exhibited sociopathic tendencies.
Lights a lantern outside
the bedroom door
at night
to be certain no spirit steals
her intentions,
written on moleskins,
under a pillow.

Dad kissed her on the head and asked “Why does your upper lip always itch?”
Still asks herself this question, there are a million answers.

He said it’s because she couldn’t keep quiet, always opened doors with stolen keys.
Theft is a common theme in her life,
whether it be a pair of gold hoop earrings, heavy,
lion-head shaped clasps,
or any man with a dagger hanging
between his legs.

She wrote a novel every time he breathed onto her neck in the nighttime.

She knew
because of the stories Dad told her, before
he crushed sage and fern together with his hands—that
this man controlled her with his silence, devoured her with his rage, and
would kill her
with his body someday.

She should’ve stayed invisible to men, but broke that magic long ago—
It wells up in the belly, radiates warmth through the heart and brain, you see it in her face.

1.
Here’s winter; you can’t dance in the park. At dawn you swayed
to a willow tree before I knew the way your fingers felt on my
head. I passed you, toward the woods, the only time I’ve ever seen
you dance. I still can’t appreciate the technicality of your art but in that
universal moment when you moved like curiosity and rain I carried that
with me through the labyrinth of maples and I don’t think it’ll ever leave
me. My head doesn’t ache, but thrashes, perhaps imploding always.

I’d curl up in the dark and hurt. You’d use peppermint oil to calm me,
than smile and go practice in the living room. I never saw you, I couldn’t
leave the bed, but I heard your movement. Thinking of you in motion
distracted me. I’m still grateful for that.

2.
I’m picking the nails off my toes in the room where you started
using acrylic. You shared your paintings with me, and they were good.
Their ghosts flicker on my ceiling at night. I’m gluing my torn off toenails
on a blank canvas you left in the closet. I arrange them in a pyramid.
My toes dangle over the canvas and fill the pyramid with blood drops.
I continue this routine until I stop bleeding. There’s nowhere near
enough blood, far too much negative space. I squeeze my feet with
my hands, force more. You always admired texture, always touched mess just to feel it;
fingers stained watercolor.

3.
If I do this every night, I’ll never dance for anyone. This is my
alleviation from fractured nerves. It empties me to imagine you danc-
ing for anyone else, letting them see what I never could.
I know you’ll want to give your dancing. I’ll swallow all of these
paintings, show them to no one if you promise you will dance
only for shadows of silhouettes.